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AUTHOR Hillkirk, Keith; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Educators from public schools and universities in 13 southeastern Ohio counties formed the Southeastern Regional Professional Development Center (SERPDC) in 1991 to address the needs of rural teachers for purposeful professional interaction and staff development. In 1992, state funding was provided for the SERPDC center, serving the Appalachian area of Ohio. The area is poor but there is a strong tradition of self-reliance with a culture of sharing and a sense of interdependence. These have led to strong volunteer support and commitment to the center. Interviews with teachers have revealed these to be the greatest strengths of the center. Other perceived strengths are: the center's rural location and culture; effective collaboration between public school educators, institutions of higher education; and the sub-regional infrastructure that has fostered the intended sense of local responsiveness and ownership; teacher empowerment and leadership; and the center's emphasis on raising the level of local expertise instead of relying on outside experts. Since its beginning, a regional governance council has overseen administrative and support service concerns while decisions about staff development programming have remained with sub-regional planning groups that include a majority of teachers. Some challenges mentioned are frustration with the relationship between the Center and the State Department of Education; distress over a recent reconfiguration of regional center boundaries; and issues of accountability and evaluation. (JLS)

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Strengths and Challenges of a Rural Professional Development Collaborative

Keith Hillkirk

Bih-Ru Chang

Leigh Ann Oettinger

Ahmet Saban

Charmaine Villet

Keith Hillkirk is Assistant Dean in the College of Education, 133 McCracken Hall, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio 45701. Bih-Ru Chang, Leigh Ann Oettinger, Ahmet Saban, and Charmaine Villet are doctoral students in Curriculum and Instruction at Ohio University. The authors may be reached at the above address or at 614-593-4404 (phone), 614-593-0569 (fax), or e-mail Hillkirk@ouvaxa.cats.ohiou.edu

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Strengths and Challenges of a Rural Professional Development Collaborative

As we know from experience and the staff development literature (Chow, Tyner, Estrin, and Koelsch, 1994; McGrew-Zoubi, 1993; Killian and Byrd, 1988; King,1988), small, isolated, rural districts face particular challenges in supporting the continuing learning of their faculties. As King (1988) states,

> Perhaps the greatest need of rural teachers is genuine, purposeful, professional interaction. Because they seldom get together to share ideas or solve common problems, few teachers develop collaborative skills or experience the benefits of collegiality. Rural staff development offers isolated teachers an opportunity for professional growth and interaction. (p. 10)

Such isolation was the case in southeastern Ohio when the state Department of Education issued requests for proposals calling for the creation of eight regional teacher centers in the fall of 1991. In response to the state's call, public school and university educators from 13 southeastern Ohio counties came together and began a process that five years later has witnessed the evolution of an infrastructure for professional development throughout the region.

The following article traces the creation and history of what is today known as the Southeastern Regional Professional Development Center (SERPDC) and examines both the accomplishments and remaining challenges which the Center faces. The ideas presented are based upon an examination of grant proposals and other artifacts along with a series of semi-structured interviews

proposals and other artifacts along with a series of semi-structured interviews which the authors conducted with public school teachers and administrators, as well as university faculty and administrators, who have served in various roles with the regional center, and with Ohio Department of Education officials who are knowledgable about statewide policies and decision making.

Origins

The call for proposals by the Department of Education that led to the creation of the center grew out of several decades of initiatives that were intended to encourage inter-district collaboration on staff development. During the 1960's and 70's annual summer Teacher Institutes were funded by the state with monies funneled through the state universities. By the early 80's staff development dollars were going directly to district central offices based upon a per-pupil and then eventually a per-teacher formula.

The national concern for accountability during the 80's was reflected in legislator questions about the actual uses and effectiveness of staff development funding. During this time the Department organized four Regional Councils that were intended to bring educators together for the sharing of ideas and strategies for the improvement of teaching. Initially unfunded, the Regional Councils eventually received minimal funding to support their meetings. But given the Department's interest in supporting both top-down and bottom-up change, it became clear that a more focused

initiative for regional collaboration was needed, and the idea for the regional centers was born.

Shortly after the call for proposals was issued, it appeared likely that competing proposals would be forthcoming from the thirteen-county region. To consider possible consequences of such a competitive process, a group of public school and university educators from each of the 13 counties came together. Participants brought their own perspectives on the problems and possibilities for improving professional development; in some cases, past shortcomings in attempts to bring public schools and higher education together to collaborate effectively colored people's attitudes towards chances for cooperation.

This initial meeting led to further discussions which continued over several weeks until consensus was reached that the best course would be to propose the creation of a regional staff development network that would be both "regionally comprehensive and locally responsive." Local responsiveness was to be ensured by the creation of three sub-regions which would include four or five counties each.

Each sub-region or consortium would be semi-autonomous and would be responsible for managing its share of grant monies. Guidelines issued by the Department of Education required that no more than 20% of funding could be used for administrative and support costs with the remainder earmarked for

staff development programming. Agreement was reached that each consortium's share of program funding would be based upon the student population within that sub-region.

During the development of the proposal, several committee members asserted that they did not want to see the creation of an administratively top-heavy bureaucratic structure that would take away dollars that could be used for professional development programming. These concerns led to agreement that for at least the first year the director of the center would be a part-time volunteer who would be supported by volunteer coordinators in each of the three sub-regions.

Initial Challenges

In late winter 1992, word came that the region's proposal had been funded and with a grant of $300,000 the Center came into being. Initially, the Southeastern Regional Teacher Center (the SERPDC's initial name) faced three major challenges: first, as a new entity it was not known and needed to establish name recognition in the region; second, creation of the regional centers represented a policy shift by the Ohio Department of Education--dollars earmarked for staff development that had previously gone to individual districts and county offices were now being funneled through the regional centers, a shift that was not welcomed by some districts; third, a long history of isolation and independence regarding professional development

decision making and offerings needed to be overcome.

As the authors met with educators throughout the region, we were interested in learning their perspectives on these three challenges, as well as other insights on the Center's first four years. Out of these discussions a pattern of successes, as well as remaining challenges, emerged. We will examine first the strengths and accomplishments of the Center and then address areas that were identified as problematic and in need of attention. We will conclude by offering several observations and suggestions for educators interested in creating or sustaining regional collaboratives.

Strengths and Accomplishments

A strength of the regional center that was mentioned often in the interviews is its rural location:

> This Appalachian area of Ohio is very poor, and people have come to realize that you can't do it alone--that you have to share whatever those minimal resources are and develop coalitions and collaboratives and share ideas and share resources and share human energy to make things successful.

Again and again interviewees talked about a culture of sharing and interdependence that has emerged over the past four years. And they stressed how critical volunteered time and energy have been to the Center's success. As the same person also pointed out,

> We realize that the center is not a place--that the center is a network of human resources that make things happen and as a result of that most of the decisions are made by a governing body that's made up of teachers.

Just as the original call for proposals required that centers be designed with a broad and diverse leadership base, the people we spoke with emphasized how critical those qualities have been to the center's success.

Yet, while we found general agreement that regional collaboration represents an essential component of the Center's accomplishments, a public school administrator noted how challenging it can be as well: "Collaboration is messy. It's not very efficient. It takes a lot of trying. But it's worth it."

Notwithstanding the above caution, a recurring theme throughout the interviews was the perception that a culture of collaboration and sharing has emerged and that not only public schools but also institutions of higher education have contributed significantly to that culture. As another public school administrator stated, none of the players in the regional center has asked the "what's in it for me question first." Rather, the emphasis "was always what kind of leadership can we provide or help to provide that will enhance opportunities for people throughout the region."

Coupled with the Center's rural location and culture, public school educator willingness and commitment to collaborate, and the effective

inclusion of higher education, a fourth strength that was mentioned by several people was the sub-regional infrastructure that has fostered the intended sense of local responsiveness and ownership. From the Center's beginnings, a regional governance council has overseen administrative and support concerns while decisions about staff development programming have remained with sub-regional planning groups that include a majority of teachers.

The fifth and related strength emphasized by several interviewees is this emphasis on teacher leadership and empowerment. As mentioned above, the original call for proposals required that teachers be highly visible in directing the centers and deciding on programming. In a teacher's words:

> If we want to be a profession, then we need to take ownership of our professional life and too many times the old model was that they'll tell you what to do and then you do it. And our RPDC has really worked from grassroots in saying look at all these things out here. What do you want to do? You make some choices; you work toward those choices. And teachers have taken that and have become, have owned it. Not all of them, just some of them. And they're starting to empower themselves a little more and realize they are the people in the classroom making those decisions. And even though there are some top-down decisions, there can also be bottom-up decisions.

For this teacher, the achievement of teacher empowerment and involvement does not come without a struggle and occasionally meets resistance: "Sometimes, you know, people would prefer to keep information quiet." But, again in her own words, she believes the struggle is worth it: "If you own a piece of it, you'll try harder and you'll work and that's one of the reasons a lot of our programs are successful is because the teachers buy into it."

A sixth strength mentioned repeatedly, and also supportive of teacher leadership and visibility, has been the Center's emphasis on raising the level of local expertise, rather than relying on outside specialists. Again and again, interviewees mentioned their frustrations with the one-shot workshops and talks that have typified previous inservice programs. As a college professor commented,

> I came out of public schools at a time where you still went in every fall, you heard your motivational speaker, here I go, I'm gonna have a great year. You went back into your classroom and you were hit with the reality of the first day of school and then nothing else happened.

By contrast, she believes that the Center is seeking to break the mold that has shaped so much staff development in the past:

> I think we're working hard to train teacher-leaders within our region so that you don't have to always bring in the big shot from somewhere else. But rather you could enable our teachers to be

able to go into buildings and provide instruction that will enable other teachers then to use these approaches.

In agreement, a public school supervisor from another part of the region noted her similar frustrations with one-shot inservice programs and explained the strategy that her sub-region has embraced.

> What we have chosen to do rather than to just bring experts in, we have selected people from throughout the four counties to go out to different places in the country to be trained. That is expensive, but it's a better investment. The value of it is once those folks are trained, they have promised to come back and train for a certain period of time for free and then we pay them later. But we get full advantage out of it because now we have resident experts. Now we have experts who are neighbors.

She went on to point out that over the course of four years they have trained hundreds of teachers in Dimensions of Learning using this model. And, she adds, a second benefit has been "breaking isolation in the districts", bringing together teachers from small, rural schools that have had minimal contact with professionals beyond their buildings.

While other strengths, such as the belief that decision-making processes and funding allocations have been determined equitably, emerged from the interviews, the sense of the Center that we have gained from our research is that its successes have primarily derived from the six areas described above: its

rural location that provided fertile ground for breaking down isolation by fostering volunteerism and involvement; consistently demonstrated willingness by public school representatives to share resources and work collaboratively; effective inclusion of higher education; strong commitment to teacher empowerment and leadership; a governance and delivery structure that enables local responsiveness and ownership; and emphasis on building and sustaining resident expertise through use of the train-the-trainers model of staff development.

At the same time, interviewees were also frank about remaining challenges that the Center faces. In the following section, we will discuss those challenges before concluding with suggestions for educators involved in establishing or sustaining regional collaboratives.

Remaining Challenges

According to the people with whom we spoke, a commonly mentioned challenge that the Center faces is communication. As the Center's rural location is perceived positively in contributing to people's willingness to volunteer and pull together, rural schools' isolation from one another requires that the Center be highly proactive in communicating to teachers about programs and the Center's mission:

> I know a problem we have, and I don't know how to address it: communication. You run into teachers all the time who have never

> heard of it [the Regional Center]. They don't know what it is. And when we have a workshop, we send out 6000 flyers. We send it to every teacher.

While this superintendent expressed frustration with the challenges of alerting and attracting teachers to staff development offerings, another issue mentioned in the interview was the importance of conveying a sense of the Center's mission: "You know you just keep trying different avenues. Different, a more effective way to communicate the mission of what the RPDC is and help teachers understand what it is."

Agreeing with the above challenges of communicating effectively, a supervisor observed that

> We're the people that have more geography to deal with. And isolation takes more money to break, not less. Where everybody is more [sic] closer together, communication can be much more easily facilitated than it is here. I get to spend a whole day on the phone making phone call after phone call because all our people don't have e-mail.

In this person's opinion, it is these challenges of isolation and distance and lack of technology that should bring more funding to rural regions, rather than less funding in comparison with urban areas, when funding is based upon teacher or student numbers.

Several other interviewees also mentioned frustration with the Center's

funding agency, the state Department of Education. As we listened to these educators talk about their work with the Regional Center, a clear sense of ownership and pride in what they have accomplished emerged. As described above, they emphasized the volunteered time and energy that went into the creation of the Center. But they also clearly expressed their resentment at what they perceive to be increased, top-down direction from the Department. For example, one person who has been actively involved in sub-region planning talked about her reaction to hearing how the Department views the regional centers. She was told that the "the Department of Education views the RPDC's as an arm of the State Department, and I felt like, you know, doing voluntary kinds of work I really don't think I have time to be an arm of the State Department also."

This person, along with several others, also expressed distress at a recent Department decision to reconfigure regional center boundaries to move from the original eight centers to twelve. For the southeastern region, the effect of this decision has been to reduce the number of counties served by the region from thirteen to nine. Interviewees lamented this change for several reasons, most significantly because they felt that the reasons for the reconfiguration were due to problems in other areas of the state and that, in effect, they were being punished for success. They shared their concerns about beginning anew to build workable, collaborative relationships. And they shared their

perceptions that their concerns were not heard.

> We have just fought this issue kicking and screaming. But I think what's happened is . . . It was already a done deal in Columbus before we got to give much feedback. But we've been to lots of meetings. We've written letters and so what happens is, in a way, I feel that we have been almost penalized for . . . working together and collaborating.

Interestingly, another person agreed with the above sentiments and yet remains optimistic about the Center and its aims:

> RPDC has quickly become more an arm of the . . . Department of Education, and there's been good and bad to that. I like to be an independent entity. I don't like people looking over my shoulder, and we have more of that now. But on the other hand, we also get to be the people that implement some things the way we want to and get to provide opportunities to people. I love to provide opportunities. It's just like getting a new opportunity for professional development is like getting a present. You know, you can't wait to unwrap it and see what it looks like.

While strong criticisms of the state Department were expressed regarding some issues, the challenge of accountability was raised by both regional educators and state department officials. One Department official stressed the constant attention that legislative watch-dog groups pay to staff development

dollars and noted an intiguing irony in observing that, in this person's many years of experience, "the more successful a program, the more intense the criticisms leveled at it." The official went on to explain that as continued funding is directed to the regional centers and other professional development efforts--$30 million dollars in the current bi-ennium--increasing scrutiny from oversight groups can be expected.

These issues of accountability and evaluation were raised by several others as well, particularly in terms of the complexity and challenge of measuring the effects of investment in teacher development. Perhaps one observer put it best in describing a project in one district to a newspaper reporter who had asked what caused significant improvements in student writing scores on a statewide test:

> And I said, 13 years ago, we had teachers involved in a project. I won't go into what it was. But that was the beginning of our changing the way we taught writing to our students. So, when you're talking about 13 years to make a difference, you know, I doubt that we could really today put our finger on anything and say well, look, this has made a difference in student achievement.

Notwithstanding this educator's perceptive insights into the complexities of measurement and accountability, both regional educators and Department officials agreed that accountability will continue to pose a major challenge to

the Center.

A final challenge that was emphasized is the need to reach out and involve building level and central office administrators in the Center. Two issues were raised. First, the need to educate central office and school building administrators about the inadequacy of the one-shot inservice workshop or day: teachers appear to recognize and feel the need for ongoing support and follow-up in professional development, while some administrators persist in old habits of wanting to bring in one-time, motivational speakers. Second, a superintendent argued the general need for more staff development for administrators in the region and stated that this area has been neglected in the past.

Discussion

The overall impression that has emerged from our inquiry is that the Southeastern Regional Professional Development Center has developed into an effective network for professional development collaboration and delivery over the past four years. From our discussions with regional educators, we learned first hand of the high degree of pride and ownership that they share for the Center. While we heard occasional concerns about delays in reimbursement, the vast majority of comments were positive in nature.

As discussed earlier, strong negative feelings were expressed by several people regarding relations with, and treatment by, the state Department of

three years it became clear that a full-time, paid director was necessary. By this time the Center had demonstrated its value in bringing funding and worthwhile programs to the region. Widespread recognition and support for hiring a full-time director had been achieved.

4. *Distribute power and control as broadly as possible.* This region appears to have chosen wisely in creating sub-regional structures that have been able to respond to local district and building needs. While the State Department's decision to reconfigure regional boundaries was resisted by this regional center, we have also observed that the region has responded positively to the change and moved forward to foster new allegiances. Informal feedback we have gathered indicates that similar developments are occurring in other regions as well.

5. *Listen carefully to complaints and respond as creatively as possible.* Following the initial creation of the regional centers, some individual districts deeply resented the shift of staff development dollars from district funding to the regional centers. Both the Southeastern Regional Center and the state department listened and responded to these concerns. In the case of the Regional Center, during its second year a formula was agreed upon by at least one sub-region which earmarked a portion of program dollars to be available for staff development programs initiated by individual districts, as long as teachers from

neighboring districts were also invited to participate. Responding to complaints across the state, the Department worked with the legislature to return some funding to individual districts. Districts now have the option of using those dollars for their own initiatives or providing additional support to regional and sub-regional programs.

6. *Recognize the critical importance of accountability and evaluation and collect data systematically and continually.* Again and again we listened to regional and state concerns about accountability. Based upon these concerns and expectations that demands for accountability will increase, we believe it is essential to educate and involve all participants within a regional collaborative in ways of collecting data and feedback. Most often, standardized test scores are associated with accountability. However, we believe that useful documentation of change and improvement can also come from such sources as classroom observation, teacher-made tests and performance-based assessments, and other artifacts of teaching and learning. Of all the topics discussed in the interviews, the area of accountability most warrants further study to identify effective ways of documenting program effects.

Conclusion

Decentralization and regionalization hold promise for broadening the base of ownership and participation in professional development. In the case

of the Southeastern Regional Professional Development Center, previously islolated rural educators from both public schools and institutions of higher education have come together to share energy and expertise in new and creative ways. As noted above, we believe that the major challenge such initiatives face is to demonstrate to policy makers that investment in professional development does pay off in improved teaching and learning.

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